

## [Harlem Conjure Man]

Belief and Customs - Conjur Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 4 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 W. 130th St. New York City

DATE October 31, 1938

SUBJECT HARLEM CONJURE MAN

1. Date and time of interview October 27, 1938
2. Place of interview HARLEM West 141st St., near Lenox Ave.
3. Name and address of informant "Sagwa" (Known only by that name) 71 West 141st. St. NYC

William weiner 513 Lenox Ave. NYC

4. Name and address of persons if any, who put you in touch with informant. Personally contacted by staff-worker.

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

See First paragraphs of Form C for information re-“Sagwa”. See page 3 for information re-“The Jupiter Man”—William Weiner.

Both informants make a living selling herbs (etc.)—and conjure lore.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER VIVIAN MORRIS

ADDRESS 225 WEST 130th STREET, NEW YORK

DATE OCTOBER 31, 1938

SUBJECT HARLEM CONJURE MAN “SAGWA” and WILLIAM WEINER - “The Jupiter Man”

1. Ancestry “Sagwa” - West Indian Negro William Weiner - “The Jupiter Man” - Negro
2. Place and date of birth indeterminable
3. Family unknown
4. Places lived in, with date could not learn

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5. Education, with dates could not learn
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates medicine men
7. Special skills and interests medicine and conjuring
8. Community and religious activities not known
9. Description of Informant for "Sagwa" see text of Form C
10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 W. 130th St. New York City

DATE October 31, 1938

SUBJECT HARLEM CONJURE MAN

The dilapidated wooden shack I visited was perched on the edge of an old junk yard in 141st Street, East of Lenox Ave., and looked as if it might collapse any moment. The huge living room sprawled dirty and unkempt and smelled of dog and cat dung. Through partly open door that led to an adjoining room, I could see two bristling German police dogs

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flanked by a half dozen or more lean and hungry-looking cats. The place had an earthen floor that was damp but firmly packed, and a dank musty odor pervaded the atmosphere.

Slouched in a broken arm-chair was a huge West Indian Negro (not black but a sallow riny yellow) who weighed close to 270 pounds. His mouth was loose and sensual; his eyes, small and crafty. The thing about him that compelled my attention most, however, was his large, bloated stomach that rose and fell at intervals like some giant toy-balloon.

I talked with him for a long time and was spellbound by all he told me but was greatly relieved when he had finished and it was time to go. Outside the night air was sweet and refreshing in comparison to the close, ill-smelling room. But I shall never forget the things I heard. If I were a true believer in fantasy, 2 Harlem would now appear to me like some strange, far-away city; a fascinating conglomeration of color, intriguing intriguing as the after-dark activity in a dimly lighted conjure man's den.

Lenox Avenue would be well populated with (and every side-street would boast) spiritualists whose side-lines would be the peddling of herbs and the brewing of weird, seething voodoo concoctions that are veiled in mystery...a heritage from the jungles of Africa and the hot tropical climates of Haiti and the West Indies.

Even now, I am almost convinced that, no matter what your ailment, there's an herb somewhere (possibly Harlem) to cure it. My conjure man insisted on it.

"Got an ache in your joints?" he wanted to know. "If you have, boil a few mullen leaves in a pan of water and drink a cup before meals.

"Your kidneys bother you? Don't let'em. Boil a couple teaspoons of cream of tartar and flaxseed in a pint of water and drink it. You'll feel like a different person.

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“Ever have trouble renting rooms or your luck go back on you? Put a handful of rice in a bag with some sycamore bark, boil and strain it then sprinkle the contents on both sides of the door-sill.

“If your husband or wife ain't treatin' you right, feedin' you cold supper or staying out nights, buy a handful of tiny red candles, smear them with maple syrup or honey, write the person's name on a piece of brown paper greased with a month old ham-skin and burn the candles under the bed. That'll fix up everything fine.

“If your boy-friend or girl-friend leaves you, take one of their old shoes, sprinkle a little “bring 'em back dust” on the soles, 3 point one to the North and the other to the South. They'll be back in a week unless somebody done used a stronger conjure than you.

“If somebody you like act kinda cool get the egg of a frizzly chicken, boil it in spring water, take it out of the shell and beat up the yolk with a lump of sugar, starch and Jimson weed; put it in a bag and hide it in his clothes and he'll wind up being yo' slave.

“There's a hundred different ways to bring yourself good luck or money or to put the jinx on somebody you don't like. All you have to do is cross the palm of the doctor.”

All root doctors, however, are not conjure men. William Weiner, for instance, who operates a root and herb store and is known to Harlemites as the Jupiter Man, is a registered pharmacist.

“I didn't know much about roots and herbs twenty years ago,” he tol[?] told me when I had explained my visit,” but I've learned. If I have a touch of the grippe, do you think I take some coal tar preparation like aspirin? No sir. I hurry up and take a dose of bone set. (many very old Negroes make a tea of it.) Boneset, that's one name for it, the same thing as Indian sage or thorough-wort, or sweating plant. It sets your aching bones all right. Try it next time you get the shivers.

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"I guess I've got more herbs and roots in my store now than I've got regular medicine. Of course, some of the herbs they use here in Harlem are regular medicines under different names. To tell you the truth, I've gotten so I like the herb names better. Which would you rather take, cascara or sacred bush? It's the same thing.

4

"Some of my customers have a dozen other names for cascara, like bear berry bark, pigeon berry bark, chittern wood, and so forth. I like sacred bush better. It takes a long time to learn all the names. You have to be careful. Take bear's root. That's something else. You take that for dropsy. Some people call it robin's rye, hair cap moss or golden maiden's hair. But poor robin's plantain is something different from robin's rye. Poor robin is used for warts. It's an astringent. Another name for it is rattlesnake weed.

"If you want chinchona, you ask for quinine. My herb customers have a better name. They call it priests' bark, which goes way back to the medieval Latin, pulvis jesuiticus. See, they know more about the history of medicines than most doctors.

"Most white people don't know how much they depend on herbs. There's been a widely advertised cough medicine on the market in recent years, for example. It's a good medicine. But what's it made from? Extract of thyme. Before most people ever heard of it, the people in Harlem were buying 10 cents worth of thyme and making a brew when they got a bad cough.

"It's the same way with ephedrine jelly. That's a popular cure for colds. It's nothing in the world but an extract of ma houn, a Chinese herb. In Harlem, they've been using ma houn ever since I can remember. You can pay a lot of money for a widely advertised tonic laxative. People around Harlem who know about herbs could tell you to get some dandelion root, rhubarb, sacred bark and a little May apple root and make your own. Ten to one, if you took this home-made remedy, you'd feel much better."

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And so, after these two little visits, you can readily see why I have been almost converted to the cause of roots and herbs. So much so that I am impelled to make a further, more exhaustive, search for the fascinating conjure lore of Harlem.